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A quiet dare

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"A Quiet Dare"

by

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Center Ring

A wire walker
in red satin and sequins
stood on the wooden platform.
Fifty dirty hands
put up the tent
right in a Davenport cornfield.
Stupid, the mayor barked.
But the hammers
drove the spikes
into the frozen,
wrinkled ground.
By seven that night,
teachers and kids
were in line.
Reggie Lindstrom
saw the nail heads
and thought
they looked like books.
The bearded lady
took up the tickets,
telling everybody
to sit really close.

Underneath her cold,
slippered toes,
a creaking dare came.
The kids called out,
step off, step off.
The metal strand
stretched above
the voices and sawdust.
A clown pointed
to her
with a gloved finger.
It's showtime.

The silver cape on her shoulders,

shone with Gothic buildings,
snow and blood azaleas.
The wood below her feet
changed to
old, Minnesota skies,
flakes in the hair
and eyes.
The taut line
beckoned her.
Step out, step out.

She raised her right foot,
almost gasping.
Her fingers turned white
around the pole.
The ball of her foot
rested on the cord.
The trainers
told her
the wire
would be a tough job
but she could
do it
if she kept
her eyes
straight ahead.
Don't look down.
Don't listen to the voices.
Look across, they said.

One more step.
The ringmaster's whistle
cried out
of March days
with no mail, no calls.
No end to the classwork.
It cried of November nights
hiding under
a floral comforter.
She pulled it up to the chin,
trying to block out

sounds of laughter
outside her window.

Another step.
The heart shook
because she looked down.
So many rainy afternoons,
smoky hours in packed bars,
strings of faces
that meant nothing.
She took another inch.
The pole felt
a tiny bit lighter.

A single pair of hands
  from the corner
applauded as she passed
the half-way mark.
Her brown eyes
are now locked on
the opposite side,
spying solid ground.
Only a few
more months
to walk the wire.
Just don't stop clapping.

The Arboretum. July, 1991.

Peeling off white sneakers,
Julie sighed in delight.
Cool, frothing water was
only inches away
only past a cluster of oaks.
89 in the shade.
Sweat trickled over our temples,
cut trails down our spines.

Just take off your shoes, she said,
brushing the red
wilting curls out of her eyes.
I followed her lead.
Rolling up plaid shorts,
she stepped onto
rocks of china.
Erosion rough,
algae
soft, the stones were ice
under our toes.
She leaped,
gazelle-like into the rushing comfort.

Mixing, shooting between
the heel and arch,
cool breath coated the skin.
We laughed,
swore the giant jacuzzi
was answering prayers.
It feels fantastic, she said,
glowing
not from sunshine, but from
droplets in her hair,
on her knees and calves.

Tie the shoestrings into sloppy knots,
hang the sneakers over shoulders.

A step behind,
I was her two shoes,
cradled across square bone.
She was strong for me
in swirling days,
alert for me
in uncertain nights.
Over thick grass to a
familiar gravel road,
I lapped at her shadow.
We walked away.
She took the shoes with her.
Along with strong shoulders.

A Quiet Dare

The Bics are chasing me like madmen,
whispering in blue
trails across the walls.
A wounded scream pours from
the desk's right drawer.
The wood yawns
as spiral notebooks
sail out, binders
explode, spitting pages onto
the carpet.
Blank reams
crawl out of the shelves,
sprout wings,
and hover like geese above my bed.

My bulging eyes watch
as one by
one all the demons drop,
slamming onto
my legs and knees.
Under the blanket
the skin stings
like fire.
A voice calls out, "It's nothing."

I bolt out of bed,
rip off
the sheets, heave
up the mattress, searching
for the noise.
"What's nothing?" I ask.
Then a hum that
builds to a wail.
I grab my hair at the roots,
drop to my knees, vowing
that I have proof.
"See? See? I've been writing!" I answer.

Encircled by the paper maze,
I close my eyes
as a crisp wind rustles
the curtains.
"You've got to start over," the voice says.
I sigh, touch
the piles, see millions
of marks, see hours
over keyboards.
"What do you want?" I ask.
Silence.

My hands are trembling,
holding precious
papers, precious binders
to my chest.
"Your heart's not in it," the voice calls.
"What am I supposed to do?" I answer.

From a far corner,
the bookcase
starts to shake as Tolstoy
bursts into flames.
The lamp cuts
off and on as the stereo
pops to life
belching out Stones's tunes.
The pens roam across
the ceiling, drop like
missiles onto my shoulders.

I crawl over to the desk,
grab a red crayon and the corner
of a torn newspaper.
I write my name not even
looking at my hand.
The sixth letter stands
in place as a wave of fire
spins around my head.
"Step One," the voice says.

Cinderella's Last Prowl

Feet in blue socks for a coach,
a spiral notebook
for a godmother's wand.
It's March 13. It's 11:50.
The prince commanded
her to water
his plants before he
left for Minnesota.
Gold key in hand,
she fumbles for the lock.
Click. Twist.
Turn the knob
and sigh all
because it smells like
grapes in here.

She has faded jeans
and a red shirt for her
evening gown.
His wilting Domino's cap
rests on a peg, his refrigerator
is dotted with magnetic ABC's.
Pliers lay like open
jaws on his desk.
Now she remembers
how the waltz began.

The stereo's cassette
door always falls off,
smacking a cracked
gumball machine.
Bud Lite cans fill
a huge silver trash bag.
The tempo started slow, then
got faster.
Her royal blue skirt
swept across
a crystal floor.

His turquoise skis
are propped in a corner.
Aluminum foil stretches
in a maze to make
an antenna.
The blond prince strode out.
He bowed to the crowd,
spied a raven
stranger and asked
her to dance.

On his bed, a patchwork
quilt with yellow bows
and a brown wool blanket.
The lights dimmed
that night.
His sturdy arm was
around the tafetta
and her waist.

He led her
steps for six months.
Locked into a new and
perfect rhythm,
they were poles, drawn
together. Three-quarter
time was made of
late-night walks
and laughter.
But the harmony broke
from angry, missed
notes, from skipped
beats over days and weeks,
from off-key living.

His navy, nylon jacket rests
on the old chair's back,
and the fabric
brushes against her spine.

She sighs, hears
no more music.
The clock starts to strike.
She has memories for footmen,
fantasies for her coach's stallions.

She struggles to stand,
and opens the hall door.
Closes her
chestnut eyes.
The clock still strikes.
She steps out of the room,
locking the door behind her.
The ferns will make it
now or at least for
a few more days.
And it's midnight.

Edna's Retirement Night

At sixteen, I quit stomping puddles.
Rainy Wednesdays remind
me of Charlie.
It's seven-eighteen and
this black, worn-out tray
I've carried for twelve years
sits for good on
a coffee-stained countertop.
Charlie knew how much I love
to watch people.
But nobody told me that
those two kids were here again.

They huddle over the hot pasta
like Charlie and me did over
cotton candy
at the Ashville County Fair.
The dishes are so white --
whiter than those ten shirts Charlie
had to have pressed
each damned work week.
The kids hold hands, resting
their elbows on the navy
tablecloth.

Charlie loved that yellow checkerboard,
the one gift his aunt
gave us during the forty years
that we were married.
The kid's eyes bore
through the girl.
My God, I can remember
when I was eighteen and
Charlie looked at
me like that.

These two stupid pins in my

curly, white hair
hurt after all the long hours
taking orders.
I rub my eyes from all
the smoke, but tonight
the stupid tears start all over again.
His blond hair is
like baby sunflowers,
just like the ones
in my garden.
She is like light,
reaches for another glass of wine.
He's in brown tweed, has
broad shoulders like Charlie.
Her floral dress is
fuschia and green, settles
around her hips, and rests
near her ankles.
Charlie loved to
put his hands
on my hips, always loved
my legs in heels.

My bulging knuckles are
nothing like Charlie's were.
He pushed pencils across
faded ledgers.
He slaved over lines and grids
for thirty years while
I waited in the kitchen,
waited for the winter
to quit knifing me.
I hated the wailing
winds, especially when they sang
on the January night when
Charlie left me.

First a twitch, then
a shudder in his sleep.
My hands fumbled for a
heartbeat.

I gave up when
I knew his arms wouldn't
be here tomorrow to protect
me from the cold.

The water glasses are slippery.
I stare at the boy.
His eyes are
piercing blue, like Charlie's,
like a cold sea.
I took the job for the money, for a way
to get out of the house.
Except now it all
creeps up my spine,
makes me hate
broad shoulders.

Closed Doors

Bonnie hated to watch Malcolm wash the dishes, although she'd never admit it. He'd linger over each glass as if it was crystal. Then he'd prop the steaming saucers in the drying rack. Whether he'd been working at the gas station or out hunting, he'd always wash the dishes.

On a November night, she was sitting at the dining room table and heard plates drop to the floor. "What is he breaking now?" she groaned, shuffling to the kitchen. Through the steam rising from the sink, she saw him shudder, hunch over, and collapse. China pieces teetered on the black countertop and landed around his head.

Following the stroke, none of the doctors prepared her for this agony . . . His explosions when she'd cut off the TV after he'd watched for ten hours straight. His barking about how they couldn't pay the bills. His threats to sell the car and house. His refusals to let the children visit. His reluctance to let her help him button his sweater or comb his hair. His wandering outdoors to paint or mow the lawn in the middle of the night. His insisting that he always had to get up early.

"Quit worrying," she said to reassure him, "I can handle things." Bonnie wrung her hands, head aching after fixing his dinner.

He groaned, hobbled over to the kitchen table. His right hand locked onto the chair's back, tugging it a few inches. He got his balance, eased into the seat, and ate the last of his oatmeal.

By nine, Malcolm was going to bed. "Gotta get up early," he said, slowly stepping to the guest room.

"Malcolm, honey, please don't get up at four again. I couldn't go back to sleep when you did that." She watched him shuffle down the hall in his navy flannel pajamas and close the bedroom door behind him.

She sighed, relieved to have the time alone. Tomorrow she'd have to pacify his anger about the garden, which she tended and weeded by herself for the first time. She'd have to help him remember the little things -- the kids' birthdays, where the scissors were, how much sugar to put in his coffee. She kept filling in all the missing pieces, and she was getting tired of it.

She crawled into bed at eleven. Malcolm's snores roared across the hall. She grumbled softly. The noise was so loud that she had to get up and close the door to a thin crack of space just so that she could sleep.

Her digital clock showed 3:19 when the front door shook

Bonnie couldn't hear Malcolm snoring. She shot up in the bed, rubbed her eyes.

The screen door creaked.

Maybe it's just the wind, she thought, getting back under the blanket. But then the screen door's springs groaned, just like when the old door was opened a little too far.

She slapped her feet on the floor, rubbed her legs, trying to get warm.

Somebody's coming in here, she thought. Malcolm, what do I do? Malcolm--

She couldn't catch her breath. Tried to take tiny steps out of the room, but her feet didn't budge. The doorknob ground slowly, then louder. She knew.

The crickets outside her window roared in the darkness. Her palms were first wet, then hot, then cold. Her fingers shook as she tried to button her

housecoat. Tears welled up as she gave up trying to button the robe. The door creaked open.

"Mal--" she whispered, then bit her lip. The light sound of footsteps came through the living room, almost into the kitchen.

"Malcolm," she murmured, cold feet locked onto the carpet.

The footsteps now in the kitchen, coming into the hall. A bird screamed on the roof.

She eased open the bedroom door, heart knocking on her lungs.

A prowler, she thought, of course. The footsteps stopped. She heard the hall bookcases's doors squeak.

Bonnie tiptoed to the closet, gently opened the door. She stuck in her right arm, searching for the rifle.

There it was, loaded "because you never know," he'd said. The gun hadn't been fired for two years. She'd never fired a gun. She slid it out of the case.

She moved back to the door. The figure now headed for the guest room.

"Mal," she said softly, now back in the doorway. Her knees shook; she almost dropped the rifle.

In front of her was Malcolm's face, clear in the tiny light coming through a crack in the curtains. Night dripped from his hands.

She raised the rifle to her shoulder, tearing up. Felt the stock on her shoulder.

Her finger on the trigger. Malcolm's back in full view.

But you'll be all alone, she thought. You'll be --

Finger squeezing hard, letting go.

God, yes she'd cry when the police came.

Fourth of July

I had this girl, Sharlene, who I used to lust after. I said USED TO. We even looked at rings once, but then she turned things upside down. She slept with my best friend.

It was after the barbecue, about four o'clock. Mom and Dad had left to get some fireworks. I was alone on the patio, picking up the dishes. This screaming came from the front yard. I walked around the side of the house, and saw Sharlene, blond hair all in her face, two by four in her hands. I ran towards her, trying to see what she was doing.

"What the hell?" I yelled.

She whirled around, glared at me. Her car was parked in the pasture -- she'd driven the damn thing in over the beans on the back edge. Crushed all the plants in a good fifty yard plot. My dad was going to kill me.

"Curt, you've got to listen to me." She swung the board all around. I didn't trust her. Didn't see any reason why I had to.

"I don't want to talk to you. Get the hell outta here." My cap almost fell off my head. I was too damn angry to think straight.

"You know it was a mistake. I won't let you dump me." She came closer, gripping that board. "I just wanted to make you jealous. It worked, didn't it?"

I wished she'd just shut up.

"Why won't you forgive me?" She wore a red sundress.

"There's no way I'm talking to you. Just leave." I turned around, walked back towards the house. I heard her groan, then she followed me.

There was a rush of wind. I cut my eyes, saw her hit my Buick with the board. She pounded the driver's side.

"Sharlene! My God!" I darted for her, locked my hands on the board. I tugged at it for a few seconds, tried to pull it out of her hands. She put up a good fight --

"Let go, " I growled, brushing against her hips.

"No way. No way in hell." She broke my grip with a lunge, then hit me in the back with it, knocked me to the ground.

"See what you're driving me to?" she said, catching her breath. "See what I have to do to get your attention?"

"Shar," I groaned, waves of pain flowing up and down my spine. My shoulders were numb.

She punched out the car's back windows, glass crashing to the ground.

"Bastard! You're not being fair to me!" She dented the doors again. "Bastard! You never listen to me!"

I struggled to stand, but fell down. My back throbbed; my knees burned. She opened a door, crawled into the car, pulled out tools and a couple of boxes.

"What 'cha got in here, Curt?" she said, rummaging through old car parts and my tool box.

I took a deep breath, got onto my knees, bit my lip, pulled myself up. The minute I tried to straighten up, my stomach turned over from the heat and pain.

"Sharlene, get your damned--"

"Damned what? What?"

"Hands outta my stuff."

She wrung her hands, brown eyes shooting darts at me.

"I want you to forgive me," she screamed, hugging the wood to her chest.

"No way in hell," I told her, seeing a screwdriver and wrenches on the grass.

"Why won't you listen to me? I told you --"

"Not the truth. I had to hear it from Dave."

"It was a mistake. Don't you believe me?"

I shook my head, about to explode. She lowered her eyes. Then she shot out of the car, almost growling. I turned, saw her coming, tried to grab the board again. She hit me in the chest with it. As I fell, she hit me in the middle of the back. My eyes squinted shut from the pain. For a second, I couldn't feel my legs. I ached all over, then couldn't feel my hands.

She bent down a little, standing over me. "Now you know how I feel," she said.

"I still love you," she said into my ear. I laid there, waiting for her to hit me again.

I slowly opened my eyes, watched her strut away, drop the board. I rolled onto my back, wincing, unable to breathe. A car had started. It wasn't the Buick--

She was coming this way. She was going to run me down.

I groaned, crawled onto my knees, finally hopping up. The white Honda came over the yard straight for me.

Right then, I could've run from her. But she wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Even though I could hardly stand, I wouldn't walk around the rest of my life explaining why I ran away from her.

I'd have to explain to Dad about the beans. About my bruises. But I would not explain for what I was about to do.

The car roared across the yard, then stopped. Sharlene revved the engine.

"You trying to scare me?" I yelled. I looked down, saw a couple of wrenches at my feet.

The Honda was less than ten feet away. She patted the accelerator again.

"Feel safe in there, don't you?" I howled. I saw her face -- one second, all red. The next, white.

I dived to the ground, grabbed one of the wrenches, flung it at the windshield. The car lurched forward. One of the tires grazed my left leg and foot. I balled up as the Honda sped past me, turned, came back.

I picked up another wrench. It sailed out and smashed the hood. Sharlene stopped the car. She leaped out, arms flailing, grabbing for me.

"Damn you! Damn you!" she called.

I held my ground, knowing I wouldn't take her lies anymore. I reached out for her hands. She twisted free only for a second, because I locked onto her wrists, my fingers cutting deep.

"You're hurting me!" she wailed, but I only locked on harder.

"Curt, let go!" she said, eyes now filled with panic. I smiled, happy that she was scared of me.

"Don't," I began in a low tone," you EVER come back here unless it's with a check for all the damage."

She fumed, nostrils flaring.

"I don't want to see you," I said, fingers now cutting into her wrists. I let go of her arms, and she stepped back a little. My hands shot to her throat, wrapping around the soft skin, trying to scare her. She was going to know what it felt like to smother -- to know how I felt when I got the news from Dave.

"Curt," she whispered, hands grasping at my wrists. She shut her eyes, knees collapsing.

I let go of her , and she dropped to the ground.

"It's over. Now leave." She inched away from me, looked back --

"Leave," I said again.

I stared at her as she pulled out of the driveway, down the gravel road. Mom and Dad, coming back, passed her car. They waved to her, then stared at me.

Cicadas scraped against all the light. And I found myself . . . I found myself running down the drive. "Shar!" I shouted. " Shar! Please! Wait for me! Wait!"

Touching Down

Rafe's mother ripped weeds from the red garden soil. "You can't live with a girl who'd be like that," she barked after he'd described his latest interest to her, "not knowing what she'd do or say." Since he was ten, since his father had run off, gone North, Rafe's mother had insisted she would pick out his wife.

He shifted, pulled his cap down farther. He thought about Reba, the new girl in school, the one with auburn hair who rode a motorcycle. She'd tried out for the football team, gotten drunk in the guys' locker room with six boys. Most of all, she'd been chasing him for the last two weeks, flirting and teasing. Tonight at Cedar Lake, he'd find out what she was made of.

"But, Mom, just because a girl is different doesn't --"

"Doesn't mean you have to notice her. Or encourage her."

"But what if she notices me first?" He closed his eyes, already knowing what she would say.

"Then you have a choice. Just remember what I told you." Her black, gloved hands pulled dandelions. "You can choose her."

"But?"

His mother tossed the weeds into a pile of leaves she was making. She gathered the weeds, placed them on the concrete path, then lit a match, tossing it on the pile. The leaves buckled, crackled, crumbled.

"But you risk losing me. I'll tell you that now." She took off the gloves, turned away, strolled back to the house.

At five, Reba's Nightwing thundered into the driveway. He dashed out of the house, eyes falling to her tanned thighs, and climbed on the bike. She had on a purple t-shirt and cutoffs. Within a few minutes, they were on the interstate, rolling towards Cedar Lake.

Reba parked the bike in a clearing. In front of them stretched the lake, edged with red and brown cabins, docks with boats of all sizes. Reba smiled, touched his shoulder.

"Have you ever been here?" she asked.

"Yeah. But never at night." He glanced around, plucking at his green shirt.

"My father brought me here as a kid. He said the water was magical at night. It's the only time I come here."

"Where's your father now?"

"Beats me."

"Well, okay. Where are you taking me?" Rafe asked.

"You'll find out. After you catch me." She broke into a sprint. She ran towards the lake, then cut right.

Rafe grinned, started to chase her. Pine needles slid under his sneakers. The fading light made it hard to see her, but he caught her leaning against an oak, trying to catch her breath. As soon as he got close, she was running again.

She's going to the bridge, he thought. The July heat glued clothes to the skin. Mosquitoes whizzed past his legs.

The bridge was an old iron monstrosity that loggers used before the road was built through these Alabama woods. The lake joined the Coosa River at

this point. The bridge was slowly being dismantled. Kudzu draped its sides; rotting planks made its base. Rafe slowed down, stepped across the boards, seeing Reba standing at the midpoint. Where she stood, the guard rail was gone.

"Took you long enough," she called, unzipping the fly of her shorts. He laughed, caught his breath, glued to the movement of her hands.

Then she peeled off her shirt, revealing a blue tank swimsuit. The shirt sailed over the edge, into the dark water. She stepped closer, her bare feet making the boards creak. He welled up inside.

She pulled off her shorts, looked right into his eyes.

"Your turn," she said, pointing to his shirt.

He smiled, not knowing what to say. Then Rafe unzipped his shorts, pulled his shirt up and over his head.

"Are you ready?" she asked, motioning to the lake.

"You're crazy. It's a fifty foot drop at least."

"I know."

"Reba--"

"What are you afraid of?" she asked.

Then she dove.

He waited, held his breath until she hit the water. Reba's head broke the surface, and she swam a little to the right. Her left arm shot up, motioned for him to jump. Then he bent over, gently pushed off the bridge, and tucked his legs.

A rush of wind around his head.

He hit the water hard. The lake was frigid and deadly quiet. When his head popped above the water, he listened. Splashes off to his right ... was she crawling up onto the bank?

Muddy leaves stuck to his bare feet. "Rafe, over here." She sat between two pines, hair dripping onto her shoulders. He trembled in the cold air.

"Sit down next to me," she said.

The dirt scratched the back of his thighs. She crawled closer, chest grazing his breastbone. Her mouth brushed against his lips.

"Do you like crazy, Rafe?" she snickered. His skin tightened. Her hands clutched at him, yanked him towards her. His eyes widened as she forced him down and under her, making him lie on his back. She lowered her face, about to kiss him.

And then he groaned. His hands latched onto her shoulders, pushing her off of his chest and onto her side next to him. He scrambled up, backing away.

"My God, Reba, I --"

But she closed on him, grass and mud matted in her hair and on her hands. She wrapped her arms around his cold legs.

Later, when she rolled off of him, his eyes floated through the pines and slowly up into the stars. He remembered his mother and was happy for his father who was gone.

End of the Line

Two minutes ago, my half-brother Larry chalked his cue and said, "Norma fucked me last night. Did ya miss her?" Copenhagen sails outta his lips, stains his red plaid shirt, lands in a Dixie cup. The bastard expects me to take his crap. Thinks he can screw 'Dew one more time. I'm getting tired of losing to him. First, it's money. Then women. Tonight I'm nailing him to the wall.

We're at Jim Bob's again. A wad's on the table, maybe two hundred. Earl picks his teeth, moans," 'Dew, for Chrissakes, the shot's not lined up." He took me for seventy-five last week. Bought new croc boots with it. Earl's playing with Larry, guzzling Miller, parading around the table.

"Get off my back, Earl," I answer, grabbing a handful of burnt popcorn. I cut my eyes at Larry. He nudges back his yellow cap, runs his eyes up and down Norma.

"Purdy, for the love of God, line up the goddamned shot." Larry chuckles, strides over to the bar, begging Rick for another pitcher.

My beer's warm. Some girl in the back howls for more nachos. My hands are all hot and sweaty, making the cue slide around.

I see the shot plain as day. Gotta shoot the seven off the side, back to the left corner. Norma brushes her long nails against my thigh. Thinks she's gonna get a piece tonight.

Larry wants my money. He tells Earl," That black Stetson in Marty's window will look GOOD on me." His chalk-covered fingers pat the bills.

Norma sticks her left hand in my jean pocket.

"Awww," I say, "don't be working me when beer money's on the table." She snubs me, struts away, white jeans fitting ass-tight. She whirls around, licks her cherry lips, and tucks a stray hair behind her ear.

Earl laughs, cracks his knuckles, gets ready for his shot. He thinks I'm gonna choke. I'll tell my grandkids the shot was magic, fucking magic.

Norma's cologne is all around me. Gardenias. I turn for a second, see her with Rick at the bar. Damn bitch, letting him paw her like that. Stinky 400 pound bastard owns the place, but he can't have her.

The cue feels good now. Damned smoke in my eyes. Cottonmouth.

" I want another beer," I say to Earl. He props his cue against the wall, pours me another.

"Good luck, 'Dew," he snickers, slapping me on the back just as I'm about to slam the drink. I take a breath, watch him, then close my eyes, feeling it slide down my throat.

Norma slaps Rick. It sounds like a gunshot. She dashes back over to our corner. That's right, honey, I think. You're all mine.

"Purdy," Rick barks over the jukebox, "you gonna let Larry make pussy outta you again?"

The bastard can't talk to me like that.

I bite my lip, feel the two day chin stubble. Norma pops peanuts, winking at me. The red sweater she's got on hugs her tits real nice.

"Getting hot in here," I yell to Rick. "Open the back door."

"Open the damn thing yourself," he answers. Larry salutes him with his glass.

This is my last chance to fuck Larry. Promised myself tonight was it. No more shit fights. No more beer money gone on bets. Gonna nail him.

Check the pocket one more time.

Norma's on me again, digging in my back right pocket.

She's got my keys in her hand. She calls at me like some sick cat. "Perdew," she groans, stretching out my name like a rubber band.

She holds up my trailer key. Starts sucking the damned thing.

They can all go to hell.

Rick's yakking with Larry about bass at Lake Martin. Earl's spit shining his boots with a navy bandana.

Norma calls me again, swishes that blonde mane over her shoulder.

I look at Norma. Eye the shot. Smell of piss oozing outta the men's room. Fat bastard chases women so much he's got no time to clean up the place.

Crack. Roll. Knock.

Baby, be kind to --

Dear sweet Jesus, holy cow, there it goes.

Norma's mouth all puckered up, calling me. Larry lets go of the money, like a hawk losing his catch. Earl twists the cue, about to break it, face all red.

" It's a goddamn miracle," I say, picking up the money. "Buy your own fucking hat, " I growl to Larry.

Norma sashays up to me, eyes open. She's smiling.

"Let's go, baby," she whispers. Bites my earlobe.

"Go to hell," I answer, pushing her into Earl, stuffing the wad in my chest pocket. I stroll outside, light a cigarette. I lift up my jacket collar. It's colder out here than I thought.

My Mermaid

I was only ten days old when Marjie claimed me. Our maid, Dottie, saw my sister lean her head over my crib. She was on tip-toe. She laid her freckled face on top of mine, and said, "Jack, you just wait. Life only gets harder."

Those were tough words from a kid, but everybody around her blew 'em off just like everything else she did. Mom said she was crazy to have poems taped to her walls. She said it was stupid for Marjie to write all the time. I didn't say anything, just watched the shot glass wiggle in Mom's hand.

Mom nursed her problems with a bottle, and I blame Dad for that. Marjie swears that Mom begged her to taste some Jim Bean once, but Mom says it's a lie. Problem is, Mom doesn't remember what she did all those afternoons she laid on the couch, eyes closed, sipping Tom Collinses or Martinis. And now the pantry in my sister's house is filled with bourbon. "It makes the pain go away," Marjie says on those late night phone calls. All I recall is that I didn't want any part of the booze. I figured it was a way of denying everything. Mom ran to the bottle. Marjie wrote her stories. Dad lived at the office. And I got lost in the shuffle.

Even though the house was a wreck, I got to be a kid. Dad would toss a ball around with me, buy me the electric train I wanted at Woolworth's, even help me put it together. Mom would bake me chocolate chip cookies, and she'd always warn me to stay out of the liquor closet. "You're just a little boy," she'd say, "you don't need to know about this stuff ."

But Marjie was never a kid. She was ten when I was born. She was an auburn-haired spitfire, always hunched over notebooks, pen in her fist. She never played outside after school, because no one, not even Dottie, could make her quit writing. She wrote stories, sometimes poems, all about the South. As a kid, she could see all the hypocrisy around us. But words weren't good enough.

Dad played catch with me on smmer and fall afternoons, helping me field and pitch. He said his dream had always been to play with the Yankees, but a knee injury in high school took him out of the running. We'd howl and laugh, and when Dottie called us in for dinner, I'd see Marjie in the front porch swing, book in her hand. She'd read the title to me; it was always some Russian novel. I couldn't understand why she'd want to read something that thick. Dad would huff, walk past her. He gave up trying to get her into band or cheerleading. She didn't want to leave the house.

Locked in her room, Marjie spent hours over blank pages. I'd knock sometimes, see her huddled over the desk. Mom said part of her problem was that Marjie was a perfectionist. It didn't matter if she was dusting the furniture or watering the lawn. "The girl puts a weight on herself," Dottie told me one July afternoon. "And one day, all that stuff is going to bring her down. Hard."

And that day came. It was June, 1975. She was sixteen -- the age when all the girls chased the boys, when they experimented with booze, cigarettes, and sex.

Our country club's pool just got cleaned the day before. Chlorine oozed down the street, coming right through the bricks of our houses. It was

boiling -- 90 in the shade, and all the kids wanted to swim. I had just finished my lessons at the Y -- I ached to swim all by myself. Dottie had the day off, so Mom got stuck doing the laundry, which made her angry. But then, Mom would have been angry even if Dottie was there.

Mom hated living in Montgomery, hated having to keep company with all my father's friends. She hated the humidity, the stuffiness. The pain came out in pills -- first, just a couple of valium a day, and as the agony kept on, sometimes eight a day.

"They're just to calm my nerves," she said one April morning, hands shaking. I looked into her glazed, blue eyes. I saw nothing.

"But, Mom, why take them?" I asked, picking at my blue jeans.

She sighed, crawled up off the couch, blonde bangs in her face. "Don't ask me again, Jack. It's just that you're too young to know right now."

I was about to say something, but she raised her hand to my face, as if she was about to hit me. She patted my cheek, told me to go outside and play. I cowered away, seeing her stroll back to the liquor cabinet. She had lost control of herself long ago, but thought she still held onto me with a firm grip.

And on that June afternoon in '75, Mom insisted Marjie come to the country club with me. Marjie loved the water, but had never taken lessons. She said that if God wanted her to swim, "He would've given me webbed feet." I told her she was weird, only to be popped on the forehead. She never learned how to swim, and I never asked her why again.

The country club anchored the Narrow Lane district where we lived. Our neighborhood was filled with white, upper middle class. Everybody's dad was

either a lawyer, cotton broker, or doctor. To live on this block was to put a stamp on your face. The town could smell the hypocrisy a mile away.

All the daughters had coming-out parties, first cars at sixteen, fancy clothes in high school, and pledged to the right sororities. All the sons were clean-cut rebels and dressed nice, but forced girls to sleep with them in the backseats of Fords and Chevys. Friday and Saturday nights in Wetumpka, the cops didn't patrol very much, so all the high school kids went there to drink, talk, and have sex.

But the parents of these kids were the real puzzles. The wives were social butterflies, who joined the right clubs and were seen at all the right parties. The husbands were top in their professions, angry at the world by 5 p.m. every afternoon. All the men capped off their days with a round of drinks at the Capitol City Club, where the "boys" were. There were no Jews, no blacks to deal with. Life was simple, definable, with everyone else locked out.

The trouble came because there were people who could see the differences, the hypocrisy. These poor souls were told they only made trouble and were ridiculed, then shunned. A few fought back. And Marjie was one of them.

That Friday afternoon, she walked me to the pool. There were ten of us in the group, all kids from the neighborhood. Towels draped across our shoulders. We were a marching army, sandals slapping on the pavement. The girls had their hair in pony-tails, carried nose clips. I had my flippers, ready to make some dives. Marjie had a book with her, as usual. She was already talking about college that summer. She had told Dad that she wanted to go to Sarah Lawrence, and he exploded.

They were standing in his study, facing each other. Dad's navy tie was loose and dangling. He held a glass of water, rubbed his eyes after a long day over some new civil rights cases.

"MY GOD, Marjorie," he said, twisting his black hair with his fingers. He always did that when his back was against the wall. "You can't go there."

"I know it's expensive, but --" She began to pace, white Keds squeaking really loudly.

"It's not the money, " he groaned.

"Then what?"

"It's because no one in our family has gone anywhere North for school."

"Couldn't that mean things should change?"

"Absolutely not. George Barker's daughters go to Alabama. You could benefit from that kind of education."

"Dad, George Barker's daughters have a combined I.Q. of fifty."

"Watch your mouth." He put the glass down on his mahogany desk. "Those girls happen to be very smart," he said, picking up a pen.

"About what? How to dress? Don't tell me you actually think that stuff matters."

"Listen to me, Marjie. I don't know where this sudden burst of energy came from, but I want you to get one thing out of your head. You are NOT going North for school."

"How about letting me choose?" she fumed, stepping closer.

I was standing in the hall doorway, watching the two of them. I gripped my toy pistol really tight, knowing I had to meet Joey and Barry in a minute. But I couldn't move from that spot. Their loud voices were like magnets --

"You never let me choose. Why do I have to be like all those other girls?"

"Your mother always said that, not me. I just don't think you'd be happy that far away. That is the end of this discussion." He laid the pen down, paced next to the window.

Marjie glared at him. "Fine. I'll go to Alabama. But I won't be happy."

"Happy? You need to meet some people. Get out some. No wonder you're lonely. Take some dance lessons."

"I hate that idea. Why don't you just ask me to cut off my hands?"

"Marjie, quit exaggerating. Why are you so upset?"

She stood in front of him as he turned around. I held my breath. Marjie never walked away from a fight.

She opened her mouth and spilled out,"If you talked to Mom more, you'd know what I was talking about."

The words ripped the space between them. They were about to clash like samarais. Marjorie's saber was bigger. But Dad's pride would not let her win the match for long. Somebody had to fall, and I would see –

Marjie fall . The sound roared through the house like a thunderclap. He slapped her, knocked her to the hardwood floor. She lay there for a minute, turned her face to see him, crawled up onto her knees, then stood slowly. Her plaid jumper was twisted from the fall. She tried to fix it as she spoke again.

"You didn't have to do that," she began.

"I didn't want to, but my God, you're driving me to the edge of my patience."

I crawled closer, and I think that if a tornado had touched down outside, the two of them wouldn't have known. Dad couldn't believe this THING in front of him was his daughter.

"One day," she began, " you'll regret that you're not letting me go away."

"That's a hard thing to say. I don't think you're old enough to know exactly what's good for you."

I swallowed hard. Before she left that room, she'd leave him hanging in the noose.

"I do know. The tragedy is that YOU can't see that for yourself." She turned around, striding out of the room, passing me in the hall. She couldn't care less if I was there. Her cold shadow flowed down the walls.

I stared at her, seeing her go into her bedroom, rubbing her cheek. Dad sighed, dropped into his chair, closed his eyes. I didn't understand what happened. But the break Marjie wanted had started.

The blacktop street was an inferno on the way to the pool. All of us made a break for it when we reached the club's side door. Marjie lagged behind, looking all around. She seemed confused.

"C'mon, Marjie," I yelled as we entered the pool area.

She glanced at me with lifeless brown eyes. She looked pretty in her one-piece green tank. It had a little dip in the back, which scared Mom silly, but she didn't send it back to Sears. I can't ever remember a time when I didn't think Marjie was pretty -- she was a dream, not wearing her hair up, letting it fall over her back and shoulders. I wondered why all the boys didn't come by to see her.

In the green suit, she looked like a mermaid. I could see scales growing on her legs. I could see her sliding out of the pool, slipping down the drain, riding the water all the way out to the ocean. But she couldn't swim, so she really couldn't be a mermaid. But in my mind, she was.

Lately, she'd been reading me stories about mermaids. I kept looking for them in the bathtub. Mom told me Marjie was filling my head with nonsense, but I said she was wrong. "Didn't you know Marjie's my mermaid?" I asked one night in the bathroom. She snorted, pulled a blond strand out of her made-up face, and tossed me a towel.

We got inside the pool area. Joey and Barry, my pals for the summer, dived in, howling and laughing. Marjie spread a towel out on a red lounge chair, put down her book. She looked at me, smiled, motioned me to join the other kids who were diving in. I frowned because she put her hands on her hips.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked.

"Come into the water," I replied.

"No. I think I'll stay out here."

"But it's so hot . Why don't 'cha come in?"

She hesitated, looked around again. A few umbrella tables in the corner held moms with dark sunglasses and bronze tans. To our left was a bench packed with small kids, all talking about their families' cabins at the lake. The pool was filled with kids that day, and the deep end was packed with thirteen-year-old boys who made belly-flops off the high dive and who didn't have to work because their dads paid for everything.

The sun beat down on the wet concrete. The heat was unbearable. She stood near the chair, watching me.

"Okay, okay, just for a little while." She took off her sandals. I tossed my flippers next to her chair, walked over to the railing. I took each step into the pool, really slowly, amazed at how cold the water was. When I got in the shallow corner and paddled around, I saw her walk to the tile edge of the pool.

"It's COLD," I teased, splashing at her.

She laughed. "You silly," she said. She stepped onto the railing, her slender fingers on the bars. Down one step. Down two. Then the third. The water was like ice, but she swallowed hard, sucking in, then sliding in.

"You're right," she said, moving towards me.

Barry and Joey moved over to the deep end. She called them back, vowing to spank each one of them if they slipped out of her reach. I saw her dip, dunk her head and face. She came up from the depths, water streaming down her face and shoulders.

"Marjie, can I have my flippers now?" I asked. She stepped over to the ladder, climbed out for a minute. She told me to swim over to her.

I swam to the edge, stuck out the left foot first, then the right. She slipped on the flippers, then pushed me back into the water. She glided back to the ladder, climbed down again, and began to move a little away from me.

"Where are you going?" I called, watching her slide away from me.

"Just to deeper water. I'll be fine."

"But Marjie --"

"Just play, Jack," she said. " I'm watching you."

I smiled, as she drifted over to the cord that separated the deep and shallow ends. Barry and Joey had a blow-up float. They paddled on it near the cord. Marjie talked to them for a moment, pointing them towards me. They slid off the raft, letting her use it.

She dipped under the water, then reemerged on the other side of the cord, waving. She pulled the float to her, climbed on top, and paddled towards those teenage boys.

She was in five feet of water, never afraid of it, just hating to be caught in depths above her head. The raft drifted slowly. I played diving games with Barry. I heard laughing and splashing from the deep end.

Four minutes later, my eyes scanned the pool. The raft floated alone. No mermaid anywhere. I looked back at her chair -- not there. Around the pool area -- no redhead in a green suit. The panic hit. She was down there. Down under the water.

I screamed, "Help me, Barry," clutching at him. A lifeguard in the corner heard me, saw me point at the raft. He plunged off his chair into the water. Barry tried to hold me back, but I fought him off, pounding him with my fists.

The lifeguard came up, took a breath. Then he was down again. I held onto the cord, biting my lips, crying. Crowds gathered around the edge, also outside the fence. The sun beat down on the water, making all of us close our eyes.

The boy emerged, carrying Marjie. Her limp arms dangled helplessly next to the boy's side. He laid her on the pool's edge, climbed out, screaming for everybody to move back.

I thought she was slipping away. All those people, watching her suffer. All those mouths that would gossip for the papers. None of it made any difference if she couldn't be there to fight them. I swore that if she came back to me, I would give up anything. Anything at all.

The boy raised up as her legs shook. He let her struggle to breathe on her own. A groan deep down in her chest forced all the water out of her. It spilled and splashed next to her head. The crowd stepped back, clapped for her coming back to all of us. For a minute, her fingers clenched into fists. Her eyes closed tight; her lips were drawn. The lifeguard moved slowly away, rested on his knees, trying to unclench her hands. It was no use -- I could have told him that myself. When she was ready to come back, she would.

She opened her eyes, looking right at me. Her mouth opened, about to say something, but I stopped her. A heavy woman in a floral suit dashed over to say the doctor was coming.

"Don't say anything," I began.

She lay still, closed her eyes. Barry and Joey stood against me, eyes wide with fear.

I knelt next to Marjie, held her hand. In a minute, Dr. Nolan was there, black bag in hand, wearing that yellow blazer he always had on in the summer. Marjie allowed him to examine her, but he insisted that she had to go home.

"I can take care of myself," she said. The tone of her voice gave away that quality Mom hated in her -- her incredible way of knowing when people were crowding her, when she had to be by herself to think. Dr. Nolan gave up, then decided to call Dad and tell him the story.

That night was worse than the accident. Marjie and Dad were in the den. Dad roared about her carelessness, but he didn't hit her. I was in my room, able to hear them. Mom locked me in there before the fight started.

I heard Mom waddle to the den in her red housecoat, sighing. When the argument was over, Marjie's footsteps down the hall were very quiet. I could barely hear Dad and Mom talking. Dad said something about school, about the fact that he wouldn't let her take me anywhere again. Mom said nothing, just walked away from him, came down the hall, and unlocked my door. When she passed my door, I peeked out into the hall, wondering when the fights would stop. When would things get better? I thought.

The blazing summer changed to a mild fall. Marjie's senior year in high school was hell from the start. She neglected History and Math, spending all her time writing poems. She brought home books and brochures for colleges, only to see Dad fume over the piles of applications. In April, right before she graduated, she won a prize for a story in the school magazine. There was a reception for the winners and their parents were invited. Dad refused to go, said a conflict at the office was more important. Mom stayed in bed that day, complaining of stomach cramps. So Dottie and I went to the party.

Dottie had been our family maid for eighteen years. Dad had hired her a couple of years before Marjie was born just to do the laundry and to cook meals. She was tall, probably five eleven, with broad, masculine shoulders. She was kind to me in all the ways my own mother failed. She was a giant in her caring, wisdom, and patience. She was also black, and even though my father praised her one moment and criticized her the next, Marjie and I loved her dearly.

She wore an orange dress to the party, the one that hugged her belly after a long day of cooking. Her eyes were large and tender; her hair was cropped close to her head. Her eyes were slowly getting bad, but she didn't already have the bifocals that I always remember her wearing.

Marjie stood next to the punch table, a plaque in her hand. Dottie had convinced her to pull her hair back, so a purple ribbon rested at the nape of her neck, matching her dress. We walked up to her.

"Where's Mom?" Marjie asked, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Don't ask," Dottie groaned, reaching for a punch glass. "You know she didn't get up this morning."

I frowned, looked around at the other kids. My navy blazer itched in the heat, so I squirmed, only to have Dottie rest her hand on my shoulder.

"Jack, settle down," she said. "Marjie, I'm really sorry about your folks."

Marjie took a bite from the white cake. She laid the plaque down on a nearby metal chair. "That's okay. I'm used to it."

Dottie took a sip of her punch. "Your father doesn't know what he's missing."

"I think he does." Marjie smiled at me, motioned for me to get her another piece of cake.

"Just remember that Jack and I are here for you."

"Thank you," Marjie replied. Her hands took the cake from me. We inspected her plaque, trying to decide where in her room to hang it. The party lasted for another hour, and Dottie drove us home in my mom's old Lincoln. Dad had gotten home a minute earlier, saw us go down the hall. He seemed

puzzled, then went back to his files. Dottie knocked on Mom's door, cracked it, and there was Mom, still in bed, a pill bottle on the nightstand.

"Leave her alone," Dottie whispered. "You two go on with what you're doing."

And so we did. Marjie gave up fighting with Dad about school and left for Alabama in late August. I started third grade, spent the afternoons playing baseball or getting Dad to help me with my new erector set.

The house was still a shambles -- Dad struggled through some tough civil cases and had a tumble in some stocks that wiped out half his savings. Mom kept drinking, but not as much. By November, Dottie was running interference for Marjie -- telling Dad to write her, telling Mom to call her. They did a few times, but seemed happy not to keep in touch with their only daughter.

The house was incredibly silent at night. Dad would come home, wanting to collapse. Mom would rant about parties or meetings on her agenda, then accuse Dad of not spending enough time with me.

"Charlotte, I've got a heavy case load right now," he began one fall night in the den. "Don't start complaining to me again."

"You've got to realize that I don't like keeping up with the other partners' wives."

"You knew there were obligations that came with the job. Mine is in the office. Yours is outside the office."

Mom was quiet. Then she said,"John, you have no idea how boring those people are."

"My God, you're sounding like Marjorie. You've got to get it out of your head--"

"My head? Listen, we've got to talk about this."

"Talk?" He stepped closer to her, black blazer on his arm. "I don't think there is anything to talk about."

Dottie and I stood in the kitchen doorway, listening to them. She tugged me back, motioning for me to eat my dinner. But I wanted to hear them --

Suddenly, there was glass crashing. Then lots of glass.

Dad begged Mom, "For the love of God, Char," but she kept throwing things. I ducked into a corner of the kitchen to get away from the noise, as Dottie told me to scoot out the door and go to my room. She stuck one foot out the door, then decided to stay behind it.

Mom must have tossed something at Dad, because the kitchen door flew open, and he dashed in, slamming it behind him. Just in time -- she threw a vase at the door. It exploded into pieces as Dottie's eyes widened when she saw my dad.

There was sweat all over his face, a wild look in his eyes. He was about to speak, but he closed his eyes, wiped his upper lip.

"Go to bed, Jack," he said.

"But what's wrong with Mom?"

"I don't know."

The throwing had stopped for the moment. He sighed, acting like he was going back to the den, then decided on something else.

"Jack, go to bed. Promise that you won't go near the den." His voice was a cross between a command and a plea. I felt myself falling, like jumping off the roof of a house.

"Mom is quiet now. Hear it?" I asked.

Dottie and Dad listened. Nothing coming from the den.

"I'm calling the doctor," he said. He raced down the hall, to his study, disappearing into the dark. When he was gone, I tiptoed over to the door, put my ear to it.

"Jack, come away from the door," Dottie called. But I didn't listen to her.

Mom was walking on broken glass. She paced around the room, lingering in places, then would walk again. I heard the couch's springs squeak -- then a soft sobbing. Why wasn't Dad back yet? I figured he'd made her cry. I had never seen her throw things.

Dad was coming back, so I darted to stand next to Dottie.

Then the crying started again, only louder.

Dad lingered at the den door, hand on the knob. He was just about to open it, then let go, walking past me, out the kitchen. Dottie frowned, grumbled about how "this family is so crazy that I'm going crazy too," and grabbed my hand, tugging me back to my room. I didn't fight her, letting her lead me down the hall.

She opened the door to my room, told me to crawl into bed, that she'd be back in a bit.

I slid into the cool bed, pulling the blankets over my head. I didn't want to hear the doctor come; I couldn't stand to hear Mom's crying. I felt like I was all alone, no one to turn to.

I waited for Dottie to return and tuck me in, but it seemed like forever before she came. She bent over me, told me to sit up for a hug. After squeezing me really hard, she nudged me down under the covers. She flicked off the light, gently shutting the door. The fan purred softly, lulling me to sleep, and I smiled because I saw a vision. I thought Marjie was sitting on the edge of my bed like she did the night before she left for school.

She'd always come by and pat me on the head before she went to her room at night. Sometimes, I'd pretend to be asleep, and then she'd watch my face, sit on the bed next to me, telling me stories. She knew all along I was faking, just so that I could hear her voice once again before the next day took her away from me.

She loved to tickle me, messing up my favorite Pooh pajamas. After I finished laughing, she curled up closer, leaned down to my face.

"I want you to remember something, Jack," she began. The old jeans she wore had red patches on the knees.

"Tell me. Tell me."

"There are a lot of things you'll do later on that Daddy won't like."

"No way. I don't want him to hit me." I picked at the blanket, looked up into her face.

"That's not the point. I want you to know that even though he hit me, that doesn't make me scared of him. Are you scared of him?"

"Sometimes. When he yells. Or hits you."

"He hasn't hit me in a long time."

"But he hurt you. He hurts you all the time."

She closed her eyes. She actually had her hair up that August night since it was so hot.

"I don't want you to think about that," she said.

"I try not to. But it's hard."

" Just try to put it out of your head."

"I'll try." I reached out for her hand. Long, tapering fingers covered mine, still dirty under the nails from playing in the dirt all day.

"I wish you could stay here with me," I said.

"I promised that I'd call and write you."

"That's not enough."

"Okay, smart boy, tell me what I'm supposed to do."

I can remember squinting into the darkness, trying to see what she looked like in the moonlight pouring through my window.

"You're supposed to help me," I replied.

"Help you? I don't understand." She tucked my cotton blanket closer around me. Marjie raised her legs, putting them on the floor.

"Tell me that Mom will get better."

"Jack, I hope she does. But I can't promise that."

"Tell me that Dad will be nice to you. That he won't fight with Mom."

"I hope so."

There was a lump in my throat the size of a baseball. Marjie was telling me that she didn't have the answers.

"Don't leave me, Marjie," I whispered, pulling her closer.

"Honey, you know that I can't stay here forever. You know that."

"Just don't forget me."

"Forget you? How could I forget you?"

"Because you'll make friends, and things will be different."

Her arms pulled me to her chest, holding me tightly.

"I will NEVER forget you, Jack. You're my baby. I love you," she said. Her warm breath was in my hair, making me sleepy.

She put a finger to my lips, held my hand, told me to go to sleep.

"Will you stay with me?" I asked, closing my eyes.

"Yes. All night. Just go to sleep."

I shut my eyes, drifting off. When I woke in the morning, she lay next to me, stretched out, sneakers on the floor.

She left the next morning for school, tears in her eyes as she hugged Dottie and me goodbye. For the next four years, she went to Alabama, majored in journalism. Her last two years in school, she had her own column, which she clipped and sent to Dottie, along with letters and photos. She wrote me too, and I kept all her letters in a cedar chest at the foot of my bed. Dad called every now and then to check on her. He said it was a good thing for her to be away. "It'll let her spread her wings," he said.

Her college graduation came in May of 1981. Mom had been planning on going for weeks and had even bought a new dress for the ceremony. Dad arranged to take some time off at Mom's insistence. They weren't going to let me come, but I argued so much that they finally gave in.

Dottie told me to give Marjie a hug for her, since she would keep house for us while we were gone for a couple of days. I piled into the backseat of my

Dad's Cadillac, stretched out with some Batman comics, and slept most of the way to Tuscaloosa.

The graduation ceremony was the next afternoon. It made me sleepy, but Mom poked me awake when Marjie got her diploma. Dad never smiled, keeping a stone face the whole time.

After the closing cheer for the graduates, my parents fought their way downstairs to find Marjie. She stood off to the side, and she waved at me.

Dad approached her slowly, taking off his forest green blazer. "Good work, Marjorie."

"Thanks, Dad." She stood away from him, black robe draping the arena floor.

His eyes had a dominating look in them. "Well, coming here wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"Well --"

"I mean, things have worked out for the best. You got an education, went to the right school. "

Marjie paused, looked at Mom. "There's something you should know, Dad."

She stepped over to him. Mom held my hand tightly, but I squirmed free. I could tell there was an explosion coming --

"My God," he groaned, "you're pregnant."

Mom began to wobble. I gasped, stuck my hands in my pants pockets.

Marjie's eyes opened wide, and her face turned into a scowl. Her fists clenched, and I could hear her teeth grinding.

"No." That was what she said. Nothing more.

He was silent, then got impatient. "What is the problem then?"

"I hated this school. It was nothing but a waste of time."

"That's nonsense," he answered.

" For once, I want you to realize that you made the wrong decision."

"Decision? What decision?"

"Making me come here. It was wrong."

"You make it sound as if I owe you something," he said, half-laughing.

"You do. "

He took a step closer. Mom trembled.

"Oh, really? " he said.

"Yes," Marjie answered. She turned her back to him, black robe swinging out behind her. He exploded, jerking her arm, forcing her around.

When their faces locked, I expected Marjie to be a little afraid. But she wasn't.

He raised his hand. In front of Mom and all these people, he was going to hit her.

Her free hand shot over to his wrist, blocking the strike. Her eyes were daggers.

"Don't you EVER think of hitting me again," she said, holding his wrist like a vise.

Dad was shocked. He struggled with her for a minute, then finally gave up, snorting in disgust.

"You're not the daughter I thought I had," he sneered.

" And what did you want?"

" Not this. That's all I know."

He glanced at Mom, saw her stiffen, then relax. He turned back to Marjie--

"You sound like your mother right after we were married," he said.

Marjie said nothing. Dad walked over to Mom, grabbed her hand, tugging her along. I looked back at Marjie.

"C'mon, Jack," Dad said. "Leave your sister be. We're going back to the motel."

"But Dad –"

"No buts. Get over here. NOW."

His tone scared me. "She can take care of herself. She's made that perfectly clear today," he continued.

I turned around, waved goodbye to her. She smiled, winked at me. We left the arena and went back to the motel. Dad packed, cussed, and fumed. Mom stood outside next to the pool, watching young girls in bright bikinis dive off the cement platform. I played bag-boy, taking luggage out to the car. Dad took the heavy stuff. I moaned as all the bags were in the trunk. We couldn't be leaving without Marjie. But Dad was.

"C'mon, Charlotte," he yelled at Mom as he commanded me to get in the car.

Mom didn't budge. I wondered if she'd taken some pills before we left the motel that morning. Dad called out once more, and this time, she came back over to the car. Within a couple of minutes, we left the motel, headed home. Mom fell asleep, and I tried to do the same, but I couldn't. We left Marjie there. Now she'd never forgive Dad for what he'd done.

Three days later, Marjie showed up at the house, driving this old navy truck she bought while she was in school. She came home to pick up the last of her things. She was going to Atlanta to find a job.

Dottie and I had packed up some of her books, sitting them on the front porch. The moment the truck pulled up, my heart jumped.

The truck rumbled in. Marjie looked wonderful -- tall, slim, happy, her hair down. She wore a orange shirt and jeans, had on sunglasses shaped like cat's eyes. She strolled up to me, gave me a hug, told me to put a couple of boxes in the truck.

I hauled up the first box when Dad came out on the porch. His khaki slacks were baggy, hiding his thin legs. His eyes were haggard.

"Well, you've really done it this time," he said, watching her walking a little towards him.

" I'm only here to get my stuff. Then I'm leaving."

"And you get him to help you. You'd take him with you if you could."

"That's a decision that he has to make."

"Who's to say you haven't turned him against me?" Dad groaned.

She frowned, sighed. "If that happened, you have no one to blame but yourself."

He was silent, watching me continue to load the lighter boxes.

Marjie glided past him, into the house. Over the next hour, she gathered the last of her clothes, books, and albums. I helped her put all of it into the truck. As the last box slid in, she grabbed my hand.

"You know, he's right," she said.

"About what?" I tugged my Braves cap down farther.

"About coming with me."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I have no idea of how it would work out, but we could try."

"Marjie --"

"Just think about it. Just remember that I love you."

She crawled out of the truck, and Dad was still standing on the porch.

"That's the last of it," she said.

He nodded. Didn't budge from where he was standing.

I hopped out of the truck bed, stood next to her. She laid an arm around my shoulder.

"Well --" she said.

"What is it now, Marjorie?" Dad groaned.

She swallowed whatever it was that she wanted to say. She marched back to the truck, me following her. She turned around for a minute -- saw Dottie at the front door.

"Remember something, Jack," she whispered to me.

She put the key in the ignition. The old engine sputtered, then started slowly.

"You're mine. You always have been."

She touched my cheek, patted my head, then pulled out. The gravel ground under the tires, sending up a little cloud of smoke behind her.

Grandma's Blues

Daddy will start sleeping on porches again. Grandma's sure of it. But this time it won't be because of Mama. It'll be my fault, all because of me and some Catholic boy, or some boy that I'll meet and fall for without knowing anything about him.

"How in the world do they believe in that thing? What do they call it? Purgatory, that's it," she said one cold December evening.

"Grandma --"

"Meaty, there's no damned sense in all that incense and beads. And those candles! My God, why all the candles?"

"But --"

"Just remember this." She tugged on a soggy, gray curl, moving it from her left eye. Her hands plunged into the hot suds again, and I stepped back, tripping on my shoelace.

"A boy whose head is filled with all that stuff couldn't have a real life with you."

"So, what are you saying?"

"Meaty, you've got to listen to someone who's older, who can help you. Since your mom left --"

"I don't want to talk about that again."

"Well, you've got to face up to what she did."

"Okay. Okay. "

"Things don't go easy in this world. You've got to learn that if you want something, you pay a price for it."

"You're talking about Mama, aren't you?"

"Yeah. She lost you and your dad. And all for what?"

I was silent. My Grandma Babcock spewed the same talk at me every Christmas Day. While my grandpa, dad, and Uncle Jack watched football, I'd have to help her wash dishes. Seems like from the time I was eight or so, she told me that I had to know better than my mama. She said that I'd be tested, like Mama. But she told me she was sure I 'd make the right choice. If you don't, she said, it would kill your dad.

"I don't know," I answered.

"For nothing. Remember that. "

"So, what should I do?"

She draped the wash rag over her shoulder, then resettled in front of the sink.

"I'll tell you, you've got to act like a Babcock."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that even though half your genes are from your mom, you just can't throw yourself at anybody."

"But --"

"It means that you just can't do whatever you want."

"Are you trying to tell me that's why Uncle Jack isn't married?"

She frowned. "No. That's not it. I don't know what his problem is. I gave up trying to convince him to settle down a long time ago."

"I think --"

"I want you to realize that this town watches you. They watch all of us. The Babcocks have always been watched. You've got to learn that everything

you do is fodder for their gossip."

"But I don't care what they think."

"That's not the point. You see what thinking like that has done for your dad and his brother."

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"You're not supposed to date a Jew." She whirled to face me, brown eyes glistening with anger. Then her hands changed into fists, and her feet clamped to the floor.

My shoulders doubled up.

"And for God's sake, don't even consider a nigger. I don't even want to talk about that."

She told me last year to leave Catholic boys alone. The year before, it was the older boys. "They only want one thing from a nice girl," she told me. One time she said that a poor boy wouldn't work either -- "they're violent and rude," she said. What in the world did she expect me to do? The only thing she'd left off the list was boys who breathe.

Since Mama deserted Dad and me ten years ago, Grandma'd thought she'd steer me down the right path. She thought I needed a guardian angel, but instead of helping me, all she did was smother me, treat me like I was still eight, instead of eighteen.

She sighed, stared straight ahead. The back of her green floral dress got hard like a board. I thought I could stand there for a second longer, but I couldn't. I wished Dad would have let me go home, but he was talking to Uncle Jack, so we had to stay until he was ready to go.

"Meaty," Grandma called, "don't eat any of the divinity. I made it for your dad. You don't need any sweets."

I bit my lower lip. I wasn't even standing at the dining room table, where all the Christmas candy and cakes were. The night Mama deserted me and Dad, I ran to the kitchen and ate everything I could get my hands on. Cookies, pickles, carrots. Dad stopped eating, started drinking. As the pounds fell off him, they crawled under my skin. Boy, do I remember the fights he and Grandma would have about my weight. Ten years old, and I was a blimp. "Babcocks have an image," Grandma barked over and over," For God's sake, holding your head in a bottle does the child no good at all." Dad cursed a blue streak, stomped out of the house, and I was so nervous I kept eating.

Three years ago, Grandma told me she couldn't stand the way I looked. That hurt, but then she told me Dad didn't like the way I looked either. That killed me. That night, I gave up sweets. I hated myself enough to lose the weight -- first by starving, then by forgetting about food because I studied all the time, reading until the wee morning hours. It took ten months of work, but the weight came off.

The old Babcock house has a sixty foot long hallway, panelled in solid oak with a floor length mirror at the end. Dad always said that he'd checked his hair and clothes there before a date when he was a kid. Jack had done the same. Grandma never seemed to care that the mirror was there, almost as if she was absolutely sure what she looked like all the time.

Dad told me that at seven months, I crawled in front of it, slapped my hands on the surface, squealing and laughing. Mama was there with me, kneeling behind me, and both of us played faces in the mirror. Dad said

Mama was gorgeous right after I was born -- wavy blonde hair, petite figure, slim legs. She loved to wear blue dresses with pleats or tight skirts. Dad said that he watched her and me there for a while, smiling at his two girls. But Grandma thought the whole thing was silly.

"A baby can't tell what's going on," she groaned, standing behind Mama, whose hands held and jiggled my arms.

"She DOES know what's happening," Mama answered, wrapping her arms around me.

Grandma scowled, hands on her hips. Mama's words were only more nonsense for Grandma. Dad always said that Mama never stood at the mirror again.

I used to stand at the mirror all the time. All I saw was a brunette with glasses, braces, and 180 pounds of blubber. Last Christmas was the first time I could stand there and smile at what looked back at me. The same brown hair, but no glasses, no braces. Seventy pounds gone. Grandma still called me "Meaty" because she couldn't see that I didn't have huge thighs and tummy rolls anymore. She couldn't see past Mama's faults either, always told her that she couldn't sing, didn't stand up straight, wasn't good enough for my dad. Dad hated all the trash tossed around between Grandma and Mama. He hated the nickname she gave me.

My real name is much better -- Ginny. Well, Virginia Jane. Virginia for my mama's aunt who's famous for skinny-dipping in the Holly Springs downtown square fountain. Jane for my dad's great-grandma, Wynona's mom, who had twelve kids and a farm in northern Mississippi.

If my Grandma could forget things, my family would be a lot happier. Trouble is that she doesn't. The whole town doesn't. Being a Babcock isn't easy, but then I didn't have a choice. I think it hurts Grandma to know that even though she blows all this hot air around, it doesn't do a thing. It doesn't stop Daddy or Uncle Jack from doing what they want. It never did.

My Daddy was the Yazoo High star running-back. Everybody knew him as the guy who married the Holly Springs floosie. My mama, DeeDee Struthers, had just finished screwing up another boy's life when she got her hooks into my dad. He didn't listen to all his friends who told him to go to State on a football scholarship -- he married Mama just as soon as she'd graduated from high school. They lived in Vicksburg, and he worked at the Yazoo Mower Works there, while they lived in a tiny frame house Uncle Jack owned on six acres outside of town.

Mama and Grandma always fought -- about Mama's past, about the way she treated Dad. Mama sang in the First Baptist choir, volunteered in the Ladies' Circles, but none of it was good enough for Wynona. Mama wanted to do something with her singing, but Daddy was afraid that the family would suffer if she didn't make it. So he wouldn't let her take a chance. Grandma thought it was for the best -- "no need to fuel all those crazy dreams of hers," she said. "Just tell her to have a baby, and we'll see what 's important to her then."

There were lots of nights when Daddy and Mama would argue about her singing, his lousy job, or his family. Daddy told me that eight and a half months after their dirtiest fight, I was born on a scorching July night. That didn't mean they stopped fighting. There were lots of lonely nights when she

threw him out, when he slept on couches at friends' houses or on their front porches. The gossip mill always gave Grandma the news that her youngest son slept on porches because he couldn't get his marriage together.

Mama had an old beau from Holly Springs who almost busted up her and Dad's wedding reception. I think she started talking to him again when things got bad, and from what Grandma told me, she got involved with him and this old football buddy of Dad's, and between those two men, she dug herself "a special place in hell," as Uncle Jack said.

I can remember nights when I was six, when I'd pull up the blanket over my head just so that I wouldn't have to hear all the yelling. I suppose that's how I learned an awful lot of words most kids don't know until they're ten or twelve. Dad always checked on me after the noise died down. I know now that he slept in the spare room -- she took their bed.

The summer that I turned eight was the breaking point. Mama had her old beau fix her up with some promoter out of Nashville, who told her that she could do back-up work if she just left Mississippi. Dad refused to let her go, but Mama yelled that she had to have her chance.

"Just because you tossed your football dream away doesn't mean I have to toss away mine!" She trudged out of the kitchen. I remember sitting on the floor, watching the chicken frying in the cast-iron skillet, the grease spattering everywhere.

"DeeDee! You just can't do this! You can't just pack up and leave! Do you have any idea of what you're doing?" he said.

He shouldn't have said that. Those were Grandma's words every time Mama was in the old Babcock house. DeeDee has no idea how to cook, how

to take care of a baby, how to act in public. Well, Mama turned around. I remember that she looked at me on the floor. She said nothing.

It was June nineteenth-- she left us late in the night, hopping in the old, beaten, black Chevy truck and tore out for Texas. The last our family heard, she was in Fort Worth. Nashville was too locked up, so she went west, ended up waiting tables at a honky-tonk. She never filed for divorce from Daddy. Grandma swears the whole mess was just to punish him.

After Mama left, he had to sell the house in Vicksburg because his job at the Mower Works didn't pay enough. While I was in high school, he moved us back to Yazoo City, praying a good job would come through. When we left the house in Vicksburg, the first thing he wanted sold was their bed -- Mama brought men into the house while he was gone, but I never knew because she made me go to a friend's house or got the men to come around the front way, just so that I couldn't see them.

Trouble was that nobody wanted that huge thing, so he did the only thing he could to get that woman out of his mind. He chopped the frame into pieces in the front yard, not caring who saw him. Then he burned it, all of it, until it was only ashes. That afternoon, we were on our way back to Yazoo City, back to another form of hell.

"Not gonna live with my parents," he said, running his fingers through his chestnut bangs.

I didn't say a thing the whole way there. I didn't know what to say. I'd lost my mama. I'd lost my home. Even with my daddy sitting right next to me, I didn't think we had a chance. I wish we'd stayed in Vicksburg. He didn't

want to go home. He didn't want to face his mother and the whole stinking town. But he thought he didn't have a choice.

Yazoo City and Babcocks have been a couple over the past hundred and fifty years. Babcocks had huge cotton mills in town, owned some of the best farmland in the area, sent their sons to good schools. When my grandpa came along, his dad brought Yazoo City its first car dealership and soon a Coca-Cola bottling plant. My grandpa went to Ole Miss, majored in Business, so that he could take over from his dad. Grandma was a polished belle -- from a wealthy, tobacco family in Charleston, who came to Mississippi, not for an education, but to marry the right man. Oh, she'll deny that was the reason she married Grandpa, but Dad swears that she's always been MORE interested in the plants and land than Grandpa has.

The Babcock house on Grand Avenue is huge -- a relic from the 1920's that is built like a rock. The hardwood floors groan as you walk down the halls; the bathrooms still have brass fixtures. Grandpa always kept up the place, said he'd be leaving it to Uncle Jack and Daddy when he died. It has four white ionic columns in front. Grandma drapes them with Spanish moss and flowers during the spring and summer, with mistletoe during the winter.

Daddy finally found a job at the chemical plant, right outside of town. We had to live with Grandma and Grandpa for a few months until the house on Canal Street was ready. Daddy found it with an old friend's help. It was a one-story, white frame, fixer-upper. He spent every free moment after work and on the weekends painting and rewiring. The whole town thought Daddy had lost his mind -- not only did he come back disgraced, but he was going to live in a house most people considered tacky and cheap. Daddy didn't care

what the gossips said. He told me we would make it somehow, and he constantly turned down Uncle Jack's loan offers. Daddy didn't take the money for one reason, and it wasn't pride. It was fear. He'd depended and counted on people all of his life, first his parents, then Mama. And as far as he could see, those people deserted him when he needed them the most.

Our house was five miles away from the Babcock place. But even if we'd lived on Mars, it wouldn't have been far enough away. Grandma cooked for us and cleaned the house. Jack dropped by to help with repairs or just to tease me about boys and school. People would see Daddy out working in the yard, laying sod or pruning holly bushes, and they'd shake their heads, walk away slowly. Nobody let you make mistakes if you were a Babcock. And if you did, nobody let you forget them.

One Saturday morning when I sat on the front porch, holding my history book on my lap, I saw an old lady fume at the house. She was about seventy, wearing a chicken yellow hat and a polyester dress with woven sandals.

"You Ginny Babcock?" she yelled at me.

"Yeah," I answered, wishing I hadn't.

"You're the kid whose mom ran off, aren't you?"

I didn't say anything, just watched her standing at the edge of the lawn. She cupped a wrinkled hand over her eyes, trying to block out the sun.

Before I could answer her, she was strutting away. I tossed the book down on the porch, ran inside the house. In my desk were all these college applications I hadn't filled out. Grandma told me the thing for me to do was to go to school. Daddy said so too. That afternoon, I filled them out, hoping I

could find some way to get rid of all the memories these people tossed back at me.

After dinner one night in February of my senior year in high school, Daddy called me back into the kitchen.

"Ginny, come here for a second," he said.

I put my book down, went into the kitchen. I sat down next to him. The center wrinkle in his forehead was a lot deeper that it used to be.

"You haven't said a thing about school in days."

"I haven't?"

"No. Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so." I shifted in the rickety chair.

"You haven't said a thing about what you want to do this fall."

I didn't say anything.

"Don't tell me that you've found some boy and –"

"No. That's not it at all."

"Then it can't be that you want to keep the job at Black's. You're not about to do something like that," he insisted.

"No. I know that I can't spend my life in a dress shop."

"Then tell me what you want to do." He turned to face me.

"I think I'm going to school."

"College? At State?"

I hesitated. "No. Probably somewhere else."

"Ginny, have you applied to a lot of schools?"

"Just a couple. State and one other."

"And?"

"It's the other one, I think. They've offered me a scholarship."

"Who is it?"

"Georgia Tech." I picked a piece of red lint off my jeans.

"Good grief! When did you decide on doing this?"

"A couple of months ago. I didn't want to say anything in case I didn't get in."

"Well, now that you have, what do you want to do?"

I got up from the table, walking back to the living room.

"I don't know. I don't know whether I want to stay here or go away."

"It's your choice. I'd be much happier if you stayed close to home, but you've got to make up your own mind."

He followed me into the room, touched my shoulder, and strolled back to his tool shop. He'd taken the news well, but now I was afraid of what Grandma would do. I hated the idea of telling her I might be moving away, that I might be an engineer one day. She'd never believe it, tell me I was like my mama -- never thinking about the family, never thinking about what a TRUE southern girl would do. Grandma'd say that a true southern young lady does not do what men do better naturally. She should find her niche, like dancing, art, or cooking. She should leave the hard stuff to the men in her life. "That's why God made men, Meaty, " she said, "That's why you have to keep your place."

The next Saturday night, I decided to tell Grandma about my school offers.

"Meaty!" she howled. "Meaty, how could you do this?"

"Do what, Grandma?"

"Leave Mississippi like this. Going to Georgia. Trying to forget who you are."

"I didn't say that I was leaving. I said I was thinking about it."

"Thinking, doing. It's all the same, as far as I am concerned. You're practically out the door already. Leaving your dad just like your mom did."

"Grandma, Daddy told me that I had to make the choice."

"Oh, he did, did he? God, Charlie doesn't have a brain in his head when it comes to women."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that your mama was NOT the one he should've married. I tried to tell him that a LONG time ago. His father said the same thing. It was a HUGE mistake."

I tried to block out what she was saying. Grandma didn't talk much anymore. She just raved.

"Well, if that was a mistake, then I must have been one too." I played her game, wanting to see how she'd react.

Uncle Jack stood at the kitchen door, eyes wide, taking in both of us.

"Meaty, that's not what I said."

"You didn't have to say it. I've known it for years."

"Meaty –"

"And quit calling me that. Can't you just LOOK at me ONCE and not see some six-year-old kid?"

She took a step towards the sink, hands shaking. She saw Jack standing at the door.

"Jack, for God's sake, tell her that she can't talk to me like that."

"I'll say no such thing, Mama. Ginny has got to say what she wants to. She's only asking you to face the truth." He adjusted his gray, Greek fisherman's cap. The color always blended into his salt and pepper hair, setting off his coal eyes.

"The truth? My God, the truth is that the girl has NO idea of what she is doing," she replied.

"Don't talk like she's off in some cave."

"I know that she's standing right in front of me," Grandma snapped.

"Then act like it," he said.

"Well, her body might be right here, but dammit, her head has gone to muck."

"You've gotta let go of all this crap, " he replied.

"Grandma, I've got to try this. I want to have a chance." My back straightened.

"A chance? Is that what you call it?" she said.

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Then you need to realize that being a Babcock should be enough for you."

"But it's not." Those were the words I'd been dying to say to her for years.

"MY GOD !! Jack, did you hear what she said? Her own family name isn't good enough for her."

"I heard," he said, standing still.

"She sounds like DeeDee. Bitching about how this place isn't good enough for her."

"I'm not saying that the family isn't important --"

"Well, HELL, girl, what are you saying?" she asked.

"I'm saying I want to go somewhere people don't know me as Charlie Babcock's daughter. The girl whose mom is a lounge singer."

"Fine," she said, backing away from me and Jack. "Fine. Go to Georgia. Forget everything I've told you. Act like some common girl. You ought to know that you'll stick out in that place. That's a boys' school -- you'll never make it."

Jack touched my arm as I walked away from her. He followed me, but didn't try to stop me. I glided down the long hall, past the mirror, over to the front door.

"Meaty!" she called. "Meaty, no girl can do what you're planning on. Learn right now that you won't make it." I could hear her footsteps in the hall. My hand was on the doorknob -- the door was open.

"Goodbye, Grandma," I said without turning around. I stepped out the door, closing it quietly behind me. I saw Jack frown at her and go outside to have a cigarette.

I started packing for school a month early. Each day I'd stuff a few boxes, then unpack it all a couple of days later. Classes started in late August, but I hadn't decided exactly which of the two schools I wanted to go to. Both were holding places for me -- I just didn't know what to do. Daddy bought a used, red Beetle for me to have at school. He kept working long days at Mississippi Chemical. I worked at the dress shop all summer, deciding to quit the first week of August, just so that I could hang around the house and be with friends before I left.

I spent most of my days reading and swimming. At night, I loved to drive along the two-lanes that stretched on the edge of town. Right next to all of the old cotton plantations was a long piece of road that always attracted me. The blacktop wound for miles, broken now and then by a lonely streetlight . I always drove these roads, not looking for anything in particular, just thinking. Thinking about what it would be like to be somebody else, to not have people know about my family, not putting a label on me before they even met me. Grandma was right -- I really didn't have a chance of breaking the mold that followed my family everywhere we went. I couldn't break it if I stayed here. But if I left, it would trail after me.

At night, the cotton plants were like phantoms in rows, black with white robes, rising from the black dirt. Thousands of them marched to the road. Sometimes, I'd drive for an hour, the red Beetle licking up the miles. Kudzu draped telephone and light poles; a lonely restaurant with an old yellow light lit the way to Little Yazoo, a junction about six miles ahead. When I saw that light, I'd always turn around and come home, like it was some unwritten law. And tonight, I turned the car around, headed back, humming along with an Elvis tune on the radio.

I got to a familiar curve in the road, about ten miles from town. My lights revealed a jack-knifed 18-wheeler in the road. I slammed on the brakes. Off to my right was the local reservoir, a favorite fishing spot for most of the kids. I saw the rig's driver's side door was open. Against my better judgment, I got out of the car, walked over. Nobody in the truck. Then a voice --

"Miss ! Miss !"

I ran over to where I thought the voice had come from. A man, about fifty or so, stood next to the water's edge. Past him, in the water, was a truck, partially submerged. But more curious than all of this was the man who was standing on the roof of the cab. He was tall, that much I could tell. Other than that, I couldn't figure out why he was on the truck.

"Miss," the man said, " you've got to help me. The boy came outta nowhere. I tried to miss him, but he went right in the water."

"Is he hurt?" I asked.

"No. I don't think so. The truck swerved and shot straight into the water. He got out before it was under, but now that it's sinking, I can't leave him to get help."

"Does he swim?"

"I don't know, but my gosh, he did yell at me that he doesn't want to leave the truck."

"That's crazy. He's got to. It's going under. They can get a wrecker to get it out tomorrow morning."

"That's what I told him."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm getting back in the truck. Gonna bring it over here. We'll get a line and toss it out to him. Maybe I can find something in the rig that'll pull him out."

"I just can't believe he won't leave it," I answered, running back with him to the truck.

"He's young and pigheaded. That's reason enough." He unhooked the cab from the trailer. The man revved the engine, slowly putting it in reverse. As I dashed over to the water's edge, the cab came crawling over to the bank.

I looked out across the water. A streetlight cast a faint glow over the truck. The boy stood proudly, not like someone who'd just caused an accident. He had a strange way of holding his hands, somewhere between clenching them and cradling them. He has to be nervous, I thought, I can't imagine why he wants to drag this out anymore.

The young man held his ground. "Can you swim?" I called, praying that my voice would reach him.

"Yeah," he replied. "Yeah, I can."

The 18-wheeler now came slowly across the road's shoulder, just a little bit over the edge.

"Don't worry!" I screamed at him.

The trucker had found a cable in the back of his cab.

"I don't know if it'll reach him," he said, showing it to me, a scar running the length of his left hand.

The trucker indicated that he was tossing the line to the boy. The boy nodded, motioning for him to try it.

With a sweep in the air, the line hanged for a moment, then hit the water. It didn't reach.

"I'll try again," the man called out to the boy. The boy nodded.

The roof of the cab would soon disappear. I worried that the guy would try to play hero, hanging on until the last second or so. Besides, what was he waiting for out there? A miracle? I didn't think he would be able to find one.

The line flew again. It didn't reach. I saw the boy frown, look down at his feet, realizing he'd have to abandon the truck.

"What's your name?" I called out, trying to break the tension as the trucker recoiled the line.

He seemed to look right at me. There was no sound around us, just the lapping of the water as it was just about to suck the truck under. I could hear my heart beating --

"What's your name?" I asked again, wondering if he was going to answer me. Maybe he doesn't talk that much, I thought. Maybe he's some kind of drifter. Maybe Grandma's rolling over in her sleep, just wondering what kind of trouble her granddaughter is getting into.

He looked right at me again. "Tucker," he called out.

The water now gave up its fight -- the truck groaned and dropped. In that moment, he dove off the roof. I held my breath, watching. Waiting.

"Damn shame," the trucker said. "Now, we'll have to get somebody to pull him out."

"Will it be expensive?" I asked, watching Tucker slowly make his way through the water towards us. I didn't even think about snakes that late at night. It's surprising that I didn't think about a lot of things before he reached the bank.

"Probably. I hope he has money. I bet insurance doesn't cover that."

He swam over to us, finally reaching the water's edge. He crawled out. I could now see that he wore a red t-shirt and navy shorts. His shirt revealed strong arms and hard shoulders. He had the frame of a man who did hard labor, maybe on a nearby farm or at one of the factories in Jackson.

He was much taller than I originally imagined. He was at least six feet. In the moonlight, I could tell he was fair-skinned, probably a blond. My grandma would've told me to leave at that moment. I could tell that he'd be okay, if you considered losing a truck a normal way for an August night to end. She would've told me to call my dad, tell him that everything was fine, that I was delayed because of an accident. I thought about calling Daddy, but didn't think there was a phone nearby. Somehow, these two men didn't frighten me as much as Grandma would have counted on to set me back on the path to home.

Tucker smiled, then groaned as he looked back.

"Don't worry," the trucker said. "Remember where the truck fell through, and we'll get somebody out here first thing in the morning to pull it out for you."

"Sounds good to me, but I put my life's money into that truck. I don't have enough to pull it out," the boy answered.

The trucker shrugged. He'd done enough this evening. He couldn't solve this kid's problems-- he had a life too. I thought about some money Uncle Jack gave me for school. I probably wouldn't need it anyway. I'd never seen this boy before tonight. Why did I want to give him the money?

"Do you need a ride back to town?" the trucker asked Tucker.

The boy laughed. I call him a boy, but I could tell right from the first that he was older than me, not by much, maybe two or three years.

"Yeah. I do," Tucker answered.

"Well, then, c'mon. I'll give you a ride." The trucker motioned towards the rig. Something leaped inside me when Tucker turned to face me.

"Thanks for helping us," he said, looking right into my eyes.

I paused for a moment.

"I'll take you home," I blurted.

"Are you sure, Miss?" The trucker asked, looking at me. No self-respecting Mississippi woman did this kind of thing, taking a total stranger home.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am," I answered, fairly sure of myself.

He frowned, watching Tucker. The boy said nothing.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In the trailer park. Right inside the city limits."

"No problem. The park is right on my way home."

The trucker limped back to his rig, eyeing me closely. Tucker climbed into the car, and I waved at the older man before climbing in myself. As I slid in, I got a sudden jolt, then a biting chill.

In the roof light, his hair shined like gold. And his eyes -- now I could see that they were a deep, cold blue.

I cranked the car and the old Beetle rattled. Within a minute, we were far from the accident site. If Grandma could see me now, I thought, she'd have a heart attack. Picking up some strange boy in the middle of the night. She'd definitely keel over in the kitchen.

"Why haven't you told me your name?" he asked. I kept my eyes focused on the road, trying to ignore the squishing of his shorts as he turned to face me.

"Because it's not important," I replied, seeing sprinkles of rain dotting the windshield.

"Who are you?" he said quietly. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. The accelerator pulsed under my foot, but then I would've sworn the pounding came from my heart.

"Ginny Babcock," I said, turning to face him. A thunder clap echoed in the pine trees around us. I flicked on the wipers, seeing him twist towards me. We were less than five miles away from the trailer park.

"Nice girls wait for the young man to call them," Grandma always said, maybe hundreds of times. "They don't ask them out. It may be the '90's, and I may be so old that women's lib don't work for me, but no decent southern girl would act like a slut."

We said nothing to each other for a minute. Soon, I saw the lights of the trailer park right ahead. Tucker sighed, then looked out his window. In the moonlight, I saw his shoulders again, squared and strong. The t-shirt hadn't dried totally, so it still stuck to his back right at the shoulderblades. Lots of wet spots revealed pink skin.

We were about to enter the trailer park when I stopped the car.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Second street on the right. The blue and white one. Third one on the right."

I passed the first street, angry because I hadn't told him about the money. We got to the second street, and I turned.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Eighteen."

"You go to school here?" His words fell short as we pulled up in front of the trailer. I pulled the car in slowly, putting it in first.

"No. Well, I did. But I'm leaving for college soon. Or at least, I think I'm leaving."

"Going to Ole Miss or State?"

"Neither. Maybe Georgia Tech."

He was quiet. His hand was now on the door handle.

"Babcocks are big money, aren't they?"

I swallowed hard.

"Not all of us are big money," I answered.

He turned back for a moment, looking right in my face.

"I go to school in Florida," Tucker said, dropping his eyes.

"I'm here just for the summer," he continued, "staying with my mom. I'm working at the chemical plant to make some money for school."

"What year are you?"

"Starting my junior year in September."

When he lifted his eyes, they went right through me. I couldn't take my eyes off his face or his hair. Every inch of him set me on fire. Every piece of him blended with Grandma's voice, told me I was marching off to join a world I had no control in, that I was a victim of.

For a second, I remembered that Daddy was probably waiting for me. For a minute, I was wondering if he had called Uncle Jack or Grandma. And then I realized something very important --

I just didn't care anymore.

I didn't care what Wynona thought.

I didn't care what the gossips at home thought or said.

In the darkness, my hand slid across to rest on his thigh. He didn't move under my touch, but then he didn't pull away. A single light outside the trailer showed three metal steps leading to the side door. The rain kept pounding on the car's roof. I couldn't hear myself think. I couldn't hear the voices at home; all I could hear was a crashing inside my head.

He looked into my eyes. I started shaking, feeling his hand cover mine, holding it tightly. His grip was firm, but his fingers and palm were tender.

He moved his face closer to mine. My heart crushed my lungs, and I thought I would lose my breath in a moment. He shifted again, and I could now see the rise in his cheekbones.

"Self-respecting young women don't chase after the boys," Grandma said.

One inch closer. I felt his breath on my face, saw sparkles of gold in his eyes. The moonlight caught the tips of his bangs. Right then, right there, all I wanted to do was to kiss him, have him melt into me.

I leaned forward, thinking this was the biggest leap I'd ever made in my life. It's now or never, I groaned inside, waiting for the nausea to pass me by.

I touched his lips lightly. There was a slight response. His breathing got suddenly deeper. He wrapped his arms around me, pressing his mouth on mine. For a moment, I couldn't think. All I did was feel -- him, me, the vibration of the car as it was pelted with heavy rain.

We stayed locked for about a minute. Then we pulled away from each other. I looked steadily at him again, then he drew me to him. His hands rested, then gripped lightly at my thighs, working the skin and muscle slowly through his fingers. I was safe, not afraid. Poor Grandma, I thought.

After a short while, we separated again.

"I have to go," he whispered in my left ear.

"I know. So do I."

"Thanks for helping with the truck," he said, smiling.

"No problem," I replied, hands shaking a little.

He opened the car door, keeping it open as he stood in the rain.

"You're going to get soaked ," I said, seeing his shirt and shorts sticking to his body again.

"I don't care." He looked at the steps, then slowly shut the door. I closed my eyes, hand on the ignition key.

Then. A rap on the window.

I rolled it down. I was so angry with Grandma, with the whole town, that I wanted to give them something to gossip about. I was willing to go inside that trailer with a total stranger.

"Do you want to come in for a while?" he asked.

For a second, my hand was on the door handle. I let go of the ignition, gripping the door lock.

"No. I'd better not."

He took a step away, shoulders falling. He lumbered to the trailer, fumbled for a key under the mat, opened the door. It slammed shut.

I cranked the car. The rain was pouring heavier than before, so I decided on trying to make it home the short way.

But I drove home really slow, laughing about what I had done.